

## Silk roads of the twenty-first century

### The cultural dimension

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## Original Article

# Silk Roads of the Twenty-first Century: The Cultural Dimension

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## Abstract

*Much has been written about China's grand project of the twenty-first century, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road—or the Belt and Road Initiative. It is set to lift living standards through the provision of infrastructure and better connectivity where these are lacking. While economic resources are enumerated, and the maps of roads and corridors have been drafted, the cultural dimension is understudied. Beijing has not helped in this regard. Apart from vague slogans like 'win–win cooperation', 'mutual respect' and 'community of common destiny', there has been no concerted effort to showcase China's thought culture that is eminently suited to precisely this type of venture. If collaboration, even more than connectivity, is the necessary glue for bringing the regions of the Belt and Road together, then China needs to heed the advice of its own great philosophers.*

**Key words:** silk roads, Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese philosophy, China's foreign policy, Bandung spirit

## 1. Introduction

China's plans for building new silk roads of development are impressive in their sheer physical scope. Less appreciated is their potential impact in the ideational domain. Indeed, China risks missing an opportunity to deploy its vast cultural capacity towards human and ecological security. This would make the difference between being associated with the engineering feats of building ports, railways and pipelines across the Indo-Eurasian hemisphere and being embraced for a thought culture that is particularly adept at addressing contemporary challenges in the human and natural world. The new silk roads when viewed as a Confucian–Daoist–Buddhist construct would transform the whole enterprise into a more genuinely collaborative undertaking. These three philosophies represent the main spiritual traditions informing Chinese culture. Their founders were great teachers whose ideas live on and have a role to play as a spiritual compass for the new silk roads initiative. Before elaborating on this grand project of twenty-first century China, an introduction to the ancient teachers who proved so influential in the development of Chinese culture is in order.

## 2. China's Thought Culture: A Brief Survey

Confucius stands out as the leading ancient philosopher of China. Latinised from Kong Fuzi, meaning Great Master Kong,<sup>1</sup> 'Confucius' (whose actual name was Kong Qiu) lived from 551 to 479 BCE during a time of

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1. In Chinese, 'zi' (or 'tzu' in the older Wade-Giles transliteration system) is an honorific that means 'master'.

prolonged upheaval with the decline of the Zhou dynasty. This occurred during the periods known as 'Spring and Autumn' (circa 770–476 BCE) and the subsequent 'Warring States' that only ended when China was unified in 221 BCE. It was an era that gave rise to numerous schools of thought as to how to deal with the problems of the day. Like today's think tanks, each sought the ear of government. Though the morally upright Confucian school (or *rujia*: school of scholars) was not particularly successful at the time of constant warfare, it was officially adopted by later imperial rulers and was responsible for the intellectual basis of China's sophisticated bureaucracy.

Confucius' key concepts are to be found in an anthology of his sayings in the form of dialogues with his followers: *The Analects*. This text shows that Confucius sought harmonious order in the way society is governed (a theme elaborated in the following texts). He represented himself as a 'transmitter' of wisdom from the ancient Zhou sages, when in reality he was also an innovator. For example, he introduced 'an aristocracy of learning and merit, rather than family background' so that 'China excelled as a bureaucratic polity that was able to survive intact over the millennia' (Dellios & Ferguson 2013, p. 82). Yet his role as 'transmitter' of the classical canon—by helping to compile, edit and comment on the five classics of *Poetry*, *History*, *Rites*, *Changes* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*—was also highly consequential in providing the contours of Chinese thought culture. Confucianism was advanced by Mencius (Meng Ke) in the fourth century BCE and later by Xunzi. The former with his concerns for peace and unity may be viewed as the philosophical father of China's 'peaceful development' policy in today's world. The latter, Xunzi, warned against what he believed to be a natural tendency for people to be self-seeking and conflictual. He saw this as cause for educating them on the norms of appropriate conduct (*li*) so that they could become 'civilised'.

Daoism (Taoism), by comparison, is more attuned to nature as the ultimate instructor of how to live life and seeks to ground the human in a wider 'cosmic order'. Its legendary

teacher, Laozi (or Lao Tzu, meaning Old Master) is popularly depicted as riding an ox away from the artificial world of human intrigue and disturbance that characterised the times—a disappointment he shared with Confucius. Rather than persisting, as Confucius did, in trying to convince the power brokers to heed his advice and training a new generation of thinkers to lead China back to civilisational norms, Laozi simply withdrew to the wilderness. Before leaving, however, he committed his thoughts to the written word and thereby acquired a certain kind of immortality. Laozi, the teacher, who became *Laozi* the text, was more of a Lazarus (to use a Western referent) than a diligent Confucian transmitter. In encoding the wisdom of a culture almost lost to its generation, Laozi revived from the dead the mysteries that made China spiritually active.

The *Laozi* is also called the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*), which means the *Book of the Way and Its Power*. Power has many meanings, and in this case, the word (*de/te*) also translates as virtue. It is associated with following the *dao* (the Way). The *dao* itself is described as eternal and nameless and is accessed by an attitude of *wuwei* or non-action. According to the *Daodejing* (I.37): 'The way never acts [*wuwei*] yet nothing is left undone'.

Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu, 369–286 BCE) is another great Daoist philosopher who brought further insights into the nature of the *dao*, showing by way of numerous examples the importance of seeing situations from different perspectives. He used parables such as his dream that he was a butterfly and upon waking did not know whether he was a man dreaming he was a butterfly or the other way round (*The Zhuangzi*, ch. 2). Another example concerns a large leafy tree in the mountains, which managed to survive the woodcutter's axe. When Zhuangzi asked the reason, the woodcutter told him: 'There's nothing it could be used for!' Zhuangzi concluded: 'Because of its worthlessness, this tree is able to live out the years Heaven gave it' (*The Zhuangzi*, ch. 20). The moral of the story is clear:

... if you were to climb up on the Way and its  
Virtue and go drifting and wandering, neither

praised nor damned, now a dragon, now a snake, shifting with the times, never willing to hold to one course only. Now up, now down, taking harmony for your measure, drifting and wandering with the ancestor of the ten thousand things, treating things as things but not letting them treat you as a thing – then how could you get into any trouble? This is the rule, the method of Shen Nung and the Yellow Emperor. [Chuang Tzu 1968, ch. 20]

The third great teaching of traditional China was Buddhism. Unlike the other two, Confucianism and Daoism, it was not Chinese in origin but actually came from India. With its message of non-violence and respect for all sentient beings, Buddhism was localised and was occasionally adopted as the ruling imperial ideology (Ferguson & Dellios 2017, p. 87). Buddhism offers the concept of ‘skilful means’ (Sanskrit: *upāya*), which entails selecting the best strategy for communicating the *dharma* or teaching. Also notable is ‘codependent origination’ and its related idea of ‘emptiness’ (Skt: *sunyata*). This holds that all phenomena arise not of themselves but interdependently; therefore, they are ‘empty’ of their own existence and remain contingent.

Although distinctive in their own way, each of the three great teachings came together in a complementary fashion to mould Chinese culture. This is well represented in the famous depiction of Confucius, Laozi and the Buddha standing together under a tree in friendly fellowship (Figure S1). Their messages are philosophically grounded in following a path that does not veer to extremism or militancy. Their spiritual styles are not of the proselytising variety, but seek instead to encourage an inner cultivation or awareness. They are not religions in the Western sense, but their spiritual dimension can be discerned, albeit within a wide spectrum from philosophical principles to faith-based dispositions:

Buddhism may be viewed as both a philosophy and a religion. Daoism, too, bifurcates into philosophical and religious branches. Even philosophical Daoism has its mystical connotations when considering the unfathomable *dao*. Confucianism is concerned with ethics but it, too, acquired an ineffable quality when it came

to the spiritual fruits of cultivating a moral character – that is, the prize of self-realisation. [Ferguson & Dellios 2017, p. 206]

Whatever is said of Confucian hierarchy (in contradistinction to egalitarianism), Daoist strategy (‘all warfare is based on deception’—Sunzi’s *The Art of War*, I:18) and Buddhism’s detachment from life (an Indic ‘otherworldliness’), these are but selected prisms from a larger body of thought through which the teachings are seen. When seeking ethical guidance, each has much to say about compassion and helping rather than hindering the well-being of others. This suggests that elements of all three can be coordinated in new silk roads thinking. Foremost in such thinking is avoidance of China pursuing the role of the new paramount power or hegemon in global affairs.

The very nature of Confucian–Daoist–Buddhist thought culture precludes the idea of one civilisation imposing itself on another. Far from it, the process is dependent on mutuality and ‘infinite game’ dynamics (discussed in the succeeding paragraphs). The ‘community of common destiny’—a favoured formulation by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary, China’s president and ‘core’ leader, Xi Jinping—takes on a richer meaning when seen in this light. If the new silk roads project is not to be ‘derailed’ by incompetence and corruption, a scenario that would have an equally damning impact on its initiator, the CCP, much work needs to be done to bring slogans to life. But first, what is this ‘silk roads’ project?

### 3. Silk Roads of the Twenty-first Century

Formally called the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ and the ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’, President Xi Jinping announced the first in the Central Asian state of Kazakhstan and the second in the archipelagic nation of Indonesia, in September and October 2013, respectively. They became known as One Belt One Road (OBOR), and later as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in due recognition that—like the old silk road—there was more than one. Indeed, the network of old caravan trade

routes was immortalised by the evocative term 'silk road' because Chinese silk was a much sought after trading commodity. The term was coined in 1877 by Prussian geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen, though the trade routes themselves go back 2000 years. The new silk roads of the twenty-first century cross the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa, as well as the seas that wash upon them.

The authoritative *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* (National Development and Reform Commission—NDRC 2015), identifies five 'roads', 'connecting the vibrant East Asia economic circle at one end and developed European economic circle at the other, and encompassing countries with huge potential for economic development' (NDRC 2015, III. Framework, para 2). Two of the five are land and sea routes connecting China and Europe: one through Central Asia and Russia; the other via the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. A third road connects China to the Middle East via Central Asia; while a fourth takes in China, Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The fifth route branches out from China through the South China Sea and into the South Pacific (Figure S2). Then there are the six economic corridors (NDRC 2015, III. Framework, para 3): the Eurasian Land Bridge; China–Mongolia–Russia; China–Central Asia–West Asia; China–Indochina Peninsula; China–Pakistan; and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar.

Covering 65 countries, 4.4 billion people and approximately 40% of global GDP (Hofman 2015), the scale of the BRI is impressive, and it is growing. In 2015, the International Department of the CCP Central Committee and the National Development and Reform Commission assured a gathering of diplomats and business leaders that the BRI was not restricted to any particular geographic region or economic profile: 'The initiatives are open to all and countries that are interested in the initiatives can participate in them. What China has offered is only the vision' (*China Daily* 2015). It has, however, also set up the resources to bring the vision to life,

including the US\$40 million Silk Road Fund to encourage private sector investment and initiated the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with its registered capital of US \$100 billion and membership of 57 countries (including Australia). Another recently created multilateral bank, the BRICS New Development Bank, can be called on for funds. But China's own 'policy banks' are responsible for much of BRI's funding; the Export–Import Bank of China is an even bigger lender than the Asian Development Bank (ADB), having lent over US\$80 billion in 2015 compared with the ADB's US\$27 billion (Kynge 2016); the China Construction Bank has invested more than US\$300 billion in 176 Belt and Road projects in the power, mining and transport sectors (Hui 2016); while the China Development Bank is investing over US\$890 billion in a variety of such projects from infrastructure to agriculture (He 2015). Moreover, the whole BRI enterprise has attracted the attention of 'international pension funds, insurance companies, sovereign wealth funds, private equity funds and others' in their quest for 'long-term returns of 6 to 8 per cent' (investment banker Henry Tillman quoted in Kynge 2016).

The BRI goes beyond infrastructure and economic calculations, as important as these are in creating markets and improving people's standard of living. Its principles are aligned to the United Nations Charter and China's own foreign policy foundations, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence). As *Vision and Actions* (NDRC 2015, II. Principles) elaborates, the BRI is 'open for cooperation' beyond the countries of the ancient Silk Road; it is 'harmonious and inclusive', advocating inter-civilisational tolerance; it abides 'by market rules and international norms', and it 'seeks mutual benefit' so that 'the wisdom and creativity, strengths and potentials of all parties' can flourish.

This theme has been repeated in other venues and projects. For example, on the



60th anniversary of the Asian–African Conference in Bandung in 1955—commemorated for the spirit of solidarity among newly independent nations in Asia and Africa that did not want to be part of the Cold War contest—President Xi Jinping called for carrying forward the Bandung Spirit. He put forward a three-pronged approach: (i) deepening Asian–African cooperation (which ‘is not a closed and exclusive pursuit, but an open and win-win endeavour’); (ii) expanding South–South cooperation (through ‘more effective institutions and mechanisms’ and increasing ‘the representation and voice of the developing countries’); and (iii) advancing North–South cooperation ‘From the strategic perspective of building a community of common destiny for mankind, North–South relations are not merely an economic and development issue but one that bears on the whole picture of world peace and stability’ (Xi 2015).

A similar approach was evident in China’s annual regional security conference, the Xiangshan Forum. At its October 2016 meeting, there was a call for ‘partnership’ in maintaining security in the region (as distinct from an alliance system), adhering to the ‘family spirit’ in Asian culture, being inclusive (the United States and its allies were welcome), and avoiding a formal structure but instead encouraging a ‘comprehensive, multi-level and multilayered network’ (Chinese officials quoted in Ekman 2016). There is no formal regionalism in the manner of the European Union. Respect for state sovereignty is maintained, as is cultural and political diversity. Chinese-style trans-regionalism encourages common efforts—including ‘policy coordination’, ‘unimpeded trade’ and ‘financial integration’ (NDRC 2015)—but remains aware of environmental and societal needs (NDRC 2015, IV. Cooperation Priorities, paras 13, 14):

We should promote ecological progress in conducting investment and trade, increase cooperation in conserving eco-environment, protecting biodiversity, and tackling climate change, and join hands to make the Silk Road an environment-friendly one. We welcome companies from all countries to invest in China, and encourage Chinese enterprises to participate

in infrastructure construction in other countries along the Belt and Road, and make industrial investments there. We support localized operation and management of Chinese companies to boost the local economy, increase local employment, improve local livelihood, and take social responsibilities in protecting local biodiversity and eco-environment.

Meanwhile, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank states on its website (2014–2016) that it ‘will put in place strong policies on governance, accountability, financial, procurement and environmental and social frameworks’. Objectives within its Environmental and Social Framework (AIIB 2016, p. 2) include the need to

- Ensure the environmental and social soundness and sustainability of projects.
- Support integration of environmental and social aspects of projects into the decision-making process by all parties.
- Provide a framework for public consultation and disclosure of environmental and social information in relation to projects.
- Improve development effectiveness and impact to increase results on the ground, both short term and long term.

Beyond a commitment to international norms, institutional best practice with regard to sustainable development and improving the lives of working people, it is the ideational component that keeps recurring in the new silk roads narrative. The *Vision and Actions* document (NDRC 2015, III. Framework, para 1) states that BRI is based on ‘win-win cooperation that promotes common development’ and includes ‘cultural inclusiveness’. This has become a favoured formulation in Beijing’s articulations about its relationship with the world, both near and far. Though appearing bland and repetitive, its philosophical lineage is ancient. At the same time, it is of different stock to that of the Western world order, with its roots in Greco–Roman, Judeo–Christian and Enlightenment values. This is where China has failed to explain itself, if it is indeed willing to do so—lest the ancient philosophies prove too radical for Communist party rule which, ironically, is also of Western philosophical

provenance (Marxism). However, not to recognise more fully the imprint of an alternative thought culture limits BRI's potential and leaves China open to the criticism that the BRI is merely an attempt by China to carve out a sphere of influence. Such a sphere would exclude and compete with the United States, outflank India and marginalise Japan, all the while acting to provide a still developing China with resources and markets.

Undoubtedly there are geopolitical and geo-economic benefits accruing to China from its new silk roads. As Callick (2016) noted, under the BRI, 'many international roads, railways and flights will lead not to Rome but to Beijing'. This process, it is worth noting, is as much about movement as destinations. Eastern understandings of international and interpersonal relations would travel too, much as the old silk roads transmitted more than goods across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean. Ideas, religions, art and music flowed across the same networks as silk, tea, spices, furs and technologies, creating a cross-fertilisation of cultures and civilisations. So what are the ideas from the twenty-first century silk roads that are currently exchanged like coins in a busy marketplace? The contemporary use of 'win-win' terminology is especially instructive as it begins as a theory of games in the West and culminates in a Chinese discourse on mutual gain, but its cultural worth is little known.

#### 4. What is Implied by China's 'Win-Win' Discourse?

'Win-win' is part of the language of game theory that studies how players interact strategically to achieve their preferred outcomes. Although its insights can be found throughout history (Ross 2016), game theory was formalised as a field of study in the mid-twentieth century (von von Neumann & Morgenstern 1944; and Nash 1950). It began with a reliance on mathematical modelling, but over time, game theory became both more refined and more broadly based (Ross 2016), with applications to economics, politics and the social sciences generally. Thomas D. Schelling, an economist who became a

strategist in the nuclear age, stands out in this regard. He won the Nobel Prize (along with another scholar) in Economics in 2005, having been recognised for 'having enhanced our understanding of conflict and cooperation through game-theory analysis' (Nobel Media AB 2014). Schelling did this through a more cognitive approach, as evidenced by his 'theory of interdependent decisions' (Schelling 1980 [1960]). This theory holds that decision-makers do not operate in isolation, and their decisions cannot be unilateral: 'Even two completely isolated individuals, who play with each other in absolute silence and without knowing each other's identity, must tacitly reach some meeting of the minds' (Schelling 1988 [1960], p. 163). In recognising this, it is possible to devise strategies that take into account the other, persuading them not to inflict harm on oneself because of the consequences that would follow.

An example of game theory, as told by Schelling in his lectures at Harvard and recalled by one of his students, Kinsley (2005), is as follows:

So you're standing at the edge of a cliff, chained by the ankle to someone else. You'll be released, and one of you will get a large prize, as soon as the other gives in. How do you persuade the other guy to give in, when the only method at your disposal – threatening to push him off the cliff – would doom you both?

Answer: You start dancing, closer and closer to the edge. That way, you don't have to convince him that you would do something totally irrational: plunge him and yourself off the cliff.

You just have to convince him that you are prepared to take a higher risk than he is of accidentally falling off the cliff. If you can do that, you win. You have done it by using probability to divide a seemingly indivisible threat. And a smaller threat can be more effective than a bigger one. A threat to drag both of you off the cliff is not credible. A threat to take a 60 percent chance of that same thing might be credible.

Schelling's contribution to game theory depends on rational decision-making (even if the pretence of irrationality is used as a ruse). It also relies on the power of bargaining,

persuasion and what Schelling calls ‘the manipulation of risk’. The last of these forms a chapter in its own right in his 1966 classic on nuclear deterrence, *Arms and Influence* (Schelling 1966, ch. 3), as does ‘the diplomacy of violence’ (ch. 1), which captures the whole notion of coercive bargaining.

Game theory can be applied to a range of real-life situations and relationships, and not only in negative ways for positive outcomes of survival. Whether it be parenting, commerce or global politics, the same principles can be applied. Simply expressed, game theory speaks of zero-sum games in which there is an absolute winner and absolute loser (it is purely competitive) and non-zero sum games in which both sides lose or both sides win. To James P. Carse, who takes the metaphor of ‘gamelike’ situations even deeper into philosophy and psychology, the first suggests a finite game and the second an infinite one. ‘A finite game is played for the purpose of winning’, Carse (1986, p. 3) states from the outset, ‘an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play’. Finite games such as sports, chess, debates, earning an educational qualification and war have boundaries—both spatial and temporal—in addition to the boundary represented by fixed rules. Their goal, as stated, is to win. An infinite game does not have boundaries, but ‘horizons’. It is continuous and dynamic. Finite games can be played within infinite ones, but the reverse does not hold: an infinite game cannot be played within a finite one. ‘Infinite players regard their wins and losses in whatever finite games they play as but moments in continuing play’ (Carse 1986, p. 7). Infinite games are win–win or lose–lose insofar as the players are interdependent. This means ‘they either succeed or fail together’, as East–West philosopher Roger T. Ames (2007) explains. He offers the example of ‘a mother [who] is resolutely committed to strengthening the relationship she has with her son so that together they can manage whatever increasingly complex problems their lives lived together might present’. This is an infinite game because ‘the success and prosperity of mother and son is coterminous and mutually entailing’ (Ames 2007, para 8).

Infinites games come closest to conveying the Chinese cultural understanding of ‘win–win’ cooperation. As deployed in affairs of state, it creates an impression of being a borrowed or recently learned concept. When China began using the ‘win–win’ formulation in its security discourse in 1997, it did so within a multilateral body sympathetic to collective security: that of the ASEAN Regional Forum. China was seen as having been socialised into this modality (for example, by Johnston 2008, pp. 172–3). However, ‘win–win’ and the associated ‘new security concept’ that appeared in China’s defense white papers from 1998 were not new; nor was China’s choice of friends with whom to share such a concept. In the ideologically riven age of the newly emerged People’s Republic of China (PRC), there was a commitment to a foreign policy of mutuality. As noted earlier, there were the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and they were incorporated in the final communiqué of the 1955 Bandung Conference. The Five Principles were also included in the PRC Constitution in 1982.

What was new about China’s choice of slogans and the occasions for their employment was the threat-assessed environment. Deng Xiaoping—whose leadership was responsible for introducing China’s reforms—saw no major threat brewing, but rather a great opportunity for China to develop. It needed the cooperation of others and a period of peace for this undertaking. Adopting the language (though not the mathematical abstractions) of game theory, China sought to emphasise that it did not favour an international system in which there were winners and losers. Such a system, it noted, was unsuited to a globalised interdependent world and harked back to a ‘Cold War mentality’. Although such a mindset had indeed become outmoded, the criticism from a game theory perspective, as developed by Schelling and his colleagues, does not hold for the logic of nuclear deterrence. Far from being a zero-sum game, the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons was such that survival or destruction was mutually assured. (Adapting Zhuangzi, the ‘usefulness’ of nuclear weapons was their non-use.) This



describes a non-zero-sum game. What Beijing is really saying is that this is not a game—at least not of the finite variety. The new security concept, articulated in the PRC's first defence white paper of 1998, and later as a position paper, expressed the need 'to rise above one-sided security and seek common security through mutually beneficial cooperation ... on the basis of common interests' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC 2002).

By the twenty-first century, the policy slogan of a 'new type of major-country relations' sought to ensure that China would be seen as rising or developing peacefully, not as a contender for power at the expense of the United States. Whatever Beijing's intentions, it did not need a cloaked containment policy. The 2012 US 'pivot to Asia' was widely seen to be nothing less. While the BRI of 2013 may be viewed as China's pivot westward, it nonetheless goes beyond the finiteness of a game won or lost, or the prospect of an opponent contained or deterred within an established perimeter. At its most expansive, the BRI manifests the deeply ingrained Chinese philosophy of correlativity. Unlike the West's focus on the autonomous individual, the solitary 'one', Chinese thought gravitates to a mutually regarding 'two'. The key Confucian concept of *ren* (benevolence, humaneness) is made up of the character for person (人) and the character for two (二); thus two people. The qualities of benevolence and humaneness, that make us human, come about through our experience of interacting with another. This is why the Confucian rites (*li*) are meant to be more than socially sanctioned ritual. As the outer expression of one's inner *ren* (the method of showing *ren*), *li* represents considerate behaviour towards others (Dellios & Ferguson 2013, p. 109). Like good manners, the intent is a display of thoughtfulness towards the other person. In Confucianism, this 'other-regarding' attitude is also related to *shu* (reciprocity): 'What you would not want for yourself, do not do to others' (*The Analects* 15:23). It is not a self-sacrificing posture, nor a self-referential one in deciding another's treatment but more the case of using one's judgement in evaluating another's perspective.

This shows that a Confucian does have autonomy but within a relational context in which the values of respect, empathy and co-humanity are cultivated (Chan 2000). Add to this the Daoist teaching of non-interference through non-action (*wuwei*), which allows for spontaneity (*ziran*) in one's responsiveness to the other, and there arises a more profound appreciation of the non-interference and cooperation principle within the win-win statement. In reality, not doing unto others what you would not want for yourself, and allowing for *wuwei* to nourish *ziran*, permits a process of productive mutuality that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is win-win from a Chinese philosophical perspective which, in its cultural embeddedness, makes it a living philosophy or disposition.

In international relations terms, it points to the need to build trust and to think of 'mutual respect and mutual benefit' as more than diplomatic veils for the pursuit of national self-interest. Under Confucian teaching, there is no national interest, but mutual interest. What about opposition? *The Analects* (4:18, 18:1, 19:10) advises remonstrance (*jian*). As Mattice (2014, pp. 79–80) explains, it is 'an earnest and careful presentation of reasons for opposition that is structured around the relationship of those involved, and which points out or demonstrates the problem in question'. This is similar to *shu*. The idea of opposition leads to the nature of argument. According to the Confucian philosopher, Xunzi, there is a distinction between contentiousness and cooperative argument; one functions for its own sake while the other pursues a matter of common concern (Cua in Mattice, pp. 33–34). Thus, in Confucianism, a sense of reciprocity and common interests does not negate difference and argument. Harmony in the Chinese sense includes opposition as a productive force. This may be compared with the institution of a 'loyal opposition' in parliamentary democracy. It is a form of remonstrance that, when viewed as a non-zero-sum game, allows the 'losers' a genuine role in ensuring the 'winners' remain accountable. Rather than a Hegelian–Marxist dialectics of struggle, there is a *yinyang* dialectics of harmony. One side

needs the other to maintain the system. More than that, one contains an element of the other, even though they are different. This explains their dynamic interactive nature.

It also shows an absence of hierarchy, *yin* is not better than *yang*, and vice-versa:

Instead, *yinyang* is emblematic of valuational equality rooted in the unified, dynamic, and harmonized structure of the cosmos. As such, it has served as a heuristic mechanism for formulating a coherent view of the world throughout Chinese intellectual and religious history. [Wang n.d.]

While hierarchy is often noted as a defining feature of Confucianism (the ‘prism’ through which it is often viewed), its associations with the *yinyang* concept—which is fundamental to Chinese philosophy and does not belong to any one school of thought—suggest that all is not what it seems ideationally. Confucian thought is far more complex than stereotypes suggest. To be sure, it has much in common with Daoism, while both are distinctive in their teachings. Both value non-interference, and while Confucianism is associated with ritual, its trajectory is also towards spontaneity. Confucius’ own life stages reflect this:

At fifteen, I set my heart on learning. At thirty, I know where I stand. At forty, I had no more doubts. At fifty, I knew the will of Heaven [life’s purpose]. At sixty, my ear was attuned [that is, my moral sense is well-developed]. And at seventy, I follow my heart’s desire without breaking any rule. [*The Analects* 2: 4]

Such internalisation of the moral universe suggests that one may act without imposing one’s will. In other words, the action of non-action (*wei wuwei*) allows for an infinite game modality and is distinctive from its more commonly used strategic meaning in which a particular goal is desired—such as ‘speedy victory’ in war employing various ways and means, including the art of deception. This is Sunzi’s advice when conducting a finite game (*The Art of War*, ch. 2: ‘Waging War’). And yet, there is a relationship from one level to another. A finite

activity is not without a context of a larger plan: battles and military operations do not exist in isolation of grand strategy, which continues into the peace and precedes war. It is a case of finite games within infinite games.

## 5. What Does China Need to Do? What Would Its Cultural Sages Prescribe?

China is already doing a great deal, in true Daoist fashion, by not appearing to be doing anything much at all. It keeps a relatively low profile in its global presence and massive investments, except for finite contests of demonstrative actions in the South China Sea. These have drawn so much attention that one may ask whether the usefulness of ‘island-building’ (to enhance China’s claims) in this contested sea has been rendered useless by fragmenting the ‘community of common destiny’. However, even if it has, lessons learned and altered relationships have prepared the players for a new round of possibilities. One of the possibilities is to turn the South China Sea into an example of ‘ecological civilisation’<sup>2</sup> that extends across the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Appropriately, water is a symbol of the *dao*: its softness and flexibility belie its power to change the whole landscapes through which it flows. Chinese dredgers may have built a ‘Great Wall of Sand’ in the South China Sea (Browne 2016), but a Daoist-informed geopolitics would be longer lasting. By encouraging sustainable fishing and preserving the ecological balance of the waters in its neighbourhood, China would not only be at the forefront of enhancing a precious resource. (On fisheries as a serious issue in South China Sea, see Maritime Awareness Project 2016). It would also attract a genuine ‘community of common destiny’ whose civilisational credentials would rely as much on its relationship to the environment as with the human world.

2. Launched by the 18th Central Committee of the CCP in November 2013, the term first appeared in government documents at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, and in 2012, ‘ecological civilisation’ was included in the CCP’s constitution. It is seen as the overarching vision of China’s comprehensive development so that it can balance its needs into the future.

From a Confucian perspective, the Silk Road Economic Belt provides an opportunity to turn Eurasia—the site of the geopolitical ‘great game’ between empires of the early twentieth century—into an infinite game arena. This would unfold both philosophically and structurally (via multilateral organisations) and with ‘development’ as an expanded term to include a cultivation of the other as well as the self, of economic benefits in the presence of cultural and environmental awareness.

With Buddhism’s contribution of codependent origination, the entire Belt and Road network can be imagined as a mandala.<sup>3</sup> It would comprise many distinctive but integrated and interrelating cultures. Like the Bandung Spirit, which Xi Jinping evoked on the 60th anniversary of the Asian–African Conference, a regional consciousness of being part of a whole would be encouraged. Moreover, the mandalic region’s noted characteristic of ‘adaptability’ suggests that it could ‘make sense of just about anything that was originally “foreign”’ (Reynolds 1995, p. 427). This is already true of China. Having borrowed Buddhism from India, China acquired a Buddhist identity in addition to a Daoist and Confucian one. Later, it added the layer of socialism. Its new silk roads identity is still being formed, but unless Beijing invests serious effort in deploying its cultural assets into the BRI, it risks dire criticisms—whether justified or not—of unleashing the dark side of globalisation (including inequality and exploitation) into its surrounding regions, all the while making a profit: a ‘win–win’ ratio (such as 70/30) that favours China.

On the other hand, if China does begin to implement policies that accord with its own best traditions and which align with international norms of transparency and sustainability, there are risks that the BRI will still create problems for Beijing. One risk is of an unfavourable comparison of BRI governance with China’s own restrictive political system. There is also the risk of Beijing being accused

of seeking to resurrect the old Chinese world order, in which Chinese cultural concepts prevailed in diplomacy. Neither of these need be a source of undue consternation. The BRI with its caveats of win–win cooperation and its involvement of partners at home and abroad, public and private, is showing the CCP’s adaptability beyond the bounds of Marxist orthodoxy. This was always the case, from Mao to Deng to Xi. Relatedly, the concern of China imposing its own values as the Middle Kingdom suggests a return to a world order that cannot be replicated. However, Chinese thought culture is not constrained by history. Far from it, it can be seen as the source of China’s continuity. With the new silk roads project, China stands to inspire an ideational domain of as much if not greater benefit as the physical one of economic development.

In realising the cultural dimension of the silk roads of the twenty-first century, China needs to set up educational and cultural institutions that act as think tanks and temples of learning across many languages and philosophical systems. Confucius Institutes, of which there were 480 around the world in 2014 teaching Chinese language and culture, need to evolve into genuine institutes of Confucian learning. Indeed, the creation of collaborative institutes that explore wider intellectual worlds in a more critical fashion would serve the BRI well. Daoist and Buddhist thought systems can also be deployed in problem-solving when it comes to the environment and society. Some work has begun in these directions, including the concept of an ‘ecological civilisation’ that employs Chinese philosophy for sustainable development; the expansion of cultural centres in the BRI countries, from 20 to 50 in 2020 (Deng 2015); and domestically, there is an active Chinese cultural studies scene in universities and think tanks. These include affiliations with foreign institutes of Chinese or East–West Studies. Likewise, China has initiated the Universities Alliance of the New Silk Road as a new ‘higher education platform’, which has begun to engage 60 universities from 22 countries (Sharma 2015). The important point is that China and its partners will need to actively engage this knowledge and awareness

3. Sanskrit for sacred circle, with the Buddha at the centre; but can also represent a political circle of relationships. See Dellios (2003).

at an early stage as BRI progresses. In this way, the silk roads of the future may well resemble those of the past in that they were multicultural and better aligned to Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist templates of thought.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the supporting information tab for this article.

**Figure S1** Confucius, Laozi and the Buddha commune.

**Figure S2** Routes of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative.